MARRIAGE CUSTOMS OF THE BABEMBA TRIBES

The tribe in question is that of the Babemba. The Babemba [10] have their own history, thus it is an important tribe. They claim to [175] have come originally from the Lunda kingdom. It is well known that the Lunda, situated on the upper reaches of the Kasai River, a tributary of the Congo, is one of the biggest and most powerful negro kingdoms of Africa. The Balunda established their rule over all the neighboring tribes, thus founding three big colonies which go by the name of Baluba. The first of these colonies was established at the source of the Zambezi River, partly in Portuguese Angola, partly in British Northern Rhodesia. This first colony was later conquered by the Matabeles who had originally come from Zululand. It took the name of Barotseland. The second Baluba colony was established further east between the Kasai and Sankuru rivers, while the third of the Baluba colonies settled on the banks of the Lualaba, another tributary of the Congo. The Babemba (Baluba) came from this last colony.

Their migration took place about 200 years ago. The story [167] of this migration is one of the most impressive in history. The [175] exodus lasted for nearly ten years—the tribe first crossed the Luapula, Chambezi and Luangwa rivers; but then they turned back and again crossed the Chambezi River further north, and finally settled on the banks of the Karungu River, nine kilometers (five and a half miles) north of the present-day missionary settlement of Malole. There they came upon a related tribe by the name of Babemba. The Baluba [128] superseded them entirely by appropriating their territory and bringing them into subjection. The two races soon merged. The Baluba ceased to be Baluba and were henceforth called Babemba. [101]

Since their exodus from Baluba, the Babemba have had about [175] thirty kings, each with his history—and a glorious history at that. [443] The most illustrious pages in their history describes their wars with the invading hordes of the Baangonis of Zulu origin. While all the neighboring tribes yielded and paid tribute to the Baangoni, the Babemba gloriously withstood the terrible assaults of the formidable enemy. The war lasted for ten years (from 1860 to [1870]) Finally, in the course of a decisive battle the Babemba won complete victory. Sungadiaba, the great Mungoni chieftain, died from grief over this defeat. His army was completely disorganized, and the

●175 Baangoni had to give up their plan to subjugate the Babembas. They turned towards Tabora. After their victory over the Baangoni, the Babemba on the other hand, carried the war into the territories of their cowardly neighbors, whom they subjugated and ruled with an [397] iron hand. When Mgr. Dupont came to the terrible kingdom of the Babemba for the first time, the tribe had established its rule over a territory which was twice the size of the present Vicarage. The neighboring tribes would tremble at the mere mention of the word [497] Babemba. Even today we can hear songs cursing the cruelty of the Babemba among the tribes of Tanganyika and Broken Hill.

161 The present population of the Babemba is about 100, 000. The wars of the past have decimated them.

181 The most outstanding characteristic of the Babemba is that they are a war-like tribe to the highest degree, dreaming only of pillage, battle, submission of neighboring tribes, imposition of overburdening tributes, expansion and aggrandizement of the kingdom, but all this by means of a civil and military organization which is indeed remark- [52] able. The Babemba are one of the most intelligent races of Africa. [192] They have an exceedingly rich language including more than 20, 000 [538] words; they have a literature of their own consisting of martial poetry, songs of all kinds, more than 1500 proverbs, several hundred riddles, about a thousand axioms, etc.; a treasure bequeathed by their ancestors

157 In mining centers the Babembas are known for their keenness [sea], their polite manners, their respect for authority, and their spirit of initiative.

484 My picture would not be complete if I did not mention the fact that the Babemba of today are perhaps the greatest adventurers of Central Africa. You meet Babemba everywhere. There are Babemba in Zanzibar, Panda, Lindi, Bulawayo, in Broken Hill, the Belgian Congo, in Transvaal and on the Cape. The Mubemba does not find it difficult to move; he can take care of himself, and he is at home everywhere.

584 ENGAGEMENT [Kukobeka]: Engagement takes place at an early age, around ten or twelve years, when the young betrothed are not yet nubile [imabele tayalakula]. [21]

Consent: An emissary [Shibukombe], who does not belong to the clan of those who wish to become engaged, is chosen. He is a man who enjoys a certain amount of prestige in the village and can speak out

161 These figures are likely to be inaccurate for the reserves, although the 1938 Commission reported no serious overpopulation; they certainly give an entirely misleading picture with regard to the swamp area for which Trapnell[1] notes local densities of approximately 150 and 340 persons per square mile, and a later work estimates density as high as 400 per square mile in one area and over 200 per square mile in another.[2] Labour migration affects these figures too, this subject is dealt with later.

HISTORY AND TRADITIONS OF ORIGIN

175 It is probable that, with the possible exception of the Tea, all the groups in the area came to their present habitat from west of the Luapula River in the Congo, and that they are offshoots of the great Luba tribe. There are detailed studies of the traditions of only the Bemba, Aushi and Unga, with scattered comments on the Tea.

The Bemba, in their incursion into their present habitat seem to have been preceded by the Bisa and followed by the Lunda, whom Lacerda visited in 1798 and whom Cotnoud believes to have arrived c. 1760.[3] On their arrival the Bemba began to expand rapidly, pushing back both the Bisa and Lala to the south[4] and the Lungu and Mambwe people, in the north. Livingstone passed through Bemba country early in 1867, coming in contact with them for the first time in the country north-east of Lake Bangweulu. He comments on the war-like nature of these peoples whose villages were walled and surrounded with a dry moat.[5]

At the time of the establishment of the British South Africa Company in 1899 at Kasama, the Bemba Paramount Chief held sway over the whole of the area between Lakes Mweru, Bangweulu, Nyasa and Tanganyika, and southwards into the present Lala and Lamba country. There is still a small group of Bemba near Tabora in Tanganyika.

There is little to indicate how the Bemba fought, or the nature of their military organisation. Their campaigns seem to have been essentially raids, operations with groups of mobile, well-armed, determined warriors but not on the scale of those of the highly organised Ngoni with whom they had contacts in the east. There was certainly a flourishing trade with Arab slave traders for guns and ammunition, which contributed in no small way to the success of their campaigns.[6]

The Aushi, probably an offshoot of the Lunda people of the Congo prior to their migration eastward, arrived in the area shortly after the Lunda chief, Kazembe, assumed power in the area south of Lake Mweru, c. 1750.[7] Their traditions are closely bound up with their tribal god, Mukumbo, a symbol of the authority of the Aushi Paramount Chief. At the time of their

(1) Trapnell, 1943, p.71.
(2) Brelsford, T., 1946.
(3) Cotnoud, 1914.
(4) See Lala - p.33 below for different version.
(5) Waller, 1874.
(6) Gouldsbury and Sheane, 1904. Cf. "Life of Bwembya" by A.I. Richards in *Ten Africans*, edited by M. Perham, 1936.
(7) Philpot, 1936.

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seperation from the Lunda, the Aushi were led by one Mwe, a commoner, who 'discovered' Nkumbo and whose son Chabala became the first Paramount Chief. This Chabala was subsequently killed in a disastrous war with Kazembe's Lunda but was avenged by Nkumbo who forthwith despatched a famine to the victors who had to sue for forgiveness. Nkumbo subsequently saved the Aushi again in an equally unsuccessful resistance against the Ba-Yeke.(1) The later history of the group in the closing years of the last century and the first thirty of this was occupied with a series of disputes over the paramountcy. While previously the Paramount held both secular and spiritual power - as guardian of Nkumbo - this period witnessed the split of the paramountcy into two, a secular and a spiritual chief. This division of function lasted until 1933.

The Unga are thought to be of Luba origin, and to have migrated with the Bemba and other groups in the 18th century from the west, subsequently splitting off from them with the Mukulu and Ngumbo, who later came under Aushi authority.(2) With the Chishinga and Kaonde they form a closely related block. In fact the Unga trace their ultimate descent from an ancestress, Kaundaswelwa, from whose daughters the Ngumbo, Mukulu, Chishinga and Unga trace their more immediate ancestry.(3) Their later history is one of inter-tribal quarrels and of occasional raids by the Bemba when the water-level in the swamps fell low enough to permit land-travel.

The Twa, one of a number of swamp-dwelling peoples of that name,(4) seem to have been well established in the area at the time when the Unga arrived.(5) Von Rosen, who spent some time in the area with a Swedish ethnological expedition, considers that they, along with the other groups in the area, originally came from the Congo and were of Luba stock.(6) They were at enmity with the Unga until very recently - 1943 - and as early as 1916 were made to settle at Kansenga outside Unga territory, but throughout the years of contact have intermarried freely with the Unga.

PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

The soils of the area are generally poor, of a thin sandy character, and are covered by deciduous woodland, predominantly of the type *Brachystegia-Isoberlinia*. In the Lake Basin, however, a high grass woodland (chipya) predominates, in which very tall grass grows mixed in with various types of tree. Largely deciduous, this type of woodland is remarkable for dense evergreen thickets. 134 137

The climate is characterised by a single rainy season in which generally more than adequate rainfall is assured. On the Central Plateau an average of 45 inches per year is customary, decreasing in the east and north-west and rising in the Lake Basin area. 132

The annual mean variation of temperature on the Central Plateau appears to be 55°-84°F.

(1) Moore and Beemer, 1935. see Ba-Yeke.
(2) See Philpot, 1936.
(3) Brelsford, S, 1946.
(4) Anon., N.A.D.A. 1948.
(5) Brelsford, op.cit.
(6) Von Rosen, 1914.

167 The economic wealth of the valley makes it attractive to immigrants, increasingly numerous since the development of Katanga mining enterprises has created a ready market for the Luapula fish.

Labour Migration

A considerable and growing proportion of young men seek seasonal employment in the Copperbelt and, to a lesser extent, in the Katanga mines. It has been tentatively suggested that perhaps a quarter of the male taxable population is away at work.

HISTORY

174 The people at the court of the Kazembe struck Gamitto as historically-minded to an extent unparalleled in Central Africa.(1) Some of their traditions find support in those of other tribes and in the evidence of early travellers.

The pygmies, said to have been the first inhabitants, are particularly associated with Kilwa, where, according to tradition, all but two of them perished in a fire started unwittingly by Kapunto of *Bena Bumbo* (Clay clan) who had come from the Upper Luapula. The country was gradually populated by small, self-contained groups, usually segments of matrilineal clans, which, led by their *fikolwe*, wandered in, mainly from the Luba country, in pursuit of game or in quest of new land. Among the first to come were *Bena Bumbo* (Clay clan) from Matanda on the Upper Luapula, *Bena Lunga* (Calabash clan), *Bena Ntamba* (Tortoise clan), both from the Luba territories, and the now extinct *Bena Kanoungwa*. *Bena Batilile* ("people who eat on their own", i.e. owe no allegiance and pay no tribute), the general designation given to these groups by Nkuba's followers, is an allusion to their lack of political organisation. The first Nkuba, who had broken away from the Bemba, came to Lake Mweru apparently for ivory which was not valued by the local population.(2) He established a highly-organised kingdom which extended along the lower reaches of the Luapula (from Chibondo on the western and Lukwesa on the eastern bank) to the periphery of Lake Mweru. His people intermarried with the *Bena Batilile* and their descendants became the *Bashila* (literally "fishermen") of the Lunda.

Higher up the valley were the autonomous chiefdoms of the *Bena Nzoka* (Snake clan), *Bena Nshe* (Locust clan), *Bena Ngoma* (Drum clan), *Bakunda* (Frog clan), *Bashisha* (Leopard clan) which successfully resisted Nkuba. Later arrivals from the west included the *Bena Mboko* who came under Lubunda and the *Bena Nguni* (Bird clan). They had organised courts and a system of tribute and they erected *ntemba* huts to house the relics of their dead chiefs.

175 The Lunda from the empire of Mwata Yamvo (also spelt Matiamfa, Muata Yambo, Mwata-Hianvo, Mwata yi Nwo)(3) on the rivers Kasai and Luisa made their appearance around 1740.(4) The expedition was prompted by the desire

(1) Valdez, 1861, II, p.262.
(2) Crawford, 2, p.254.
(3) Burton, op.cit., p.36; see also *The Southern Lunda and related peoples*, M. McCulloch, 1950, I.A.I.
(4) Cornevin, op.cit., p.3.

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of Muata Yamvo, who had traded with the Portuguese of Angola, to establish contact with their stations on the Zambezi.(1) The army despatched under the leadership of Kanyembo, one of Muata Yamvo's *quilolos* (captains) and reinforced by contingents of the Lube chiefs from the Lualaba, met with little resistance and progressed victoriously. Kanyembo returned to report success and in the course of the second expedition was drowned in the Lualaba by a jealous relative (son?) of Muata Yamvo.(2) Ngunda Vilunda, son of the dead man, appointed by Muata Yamvo as the governor of the newly subjugated territories, became the first Kazembe and put down a Shila rebellion. One of the Lunda chiefs married a sister of the defeated Nkuba. Henceforth successive Nkubas, who were left in possession of a district at the mouth of the Luapula, were styled "Kazembe's wives". Under the third Kazembe, Lukwesa, the Lunda conquests were extended eastwards towards the Chambezi.(3) In 1796 Lukwesa received Manoel Caetano Pereira,(4) a Goanese trader from Tete. In 1798 Lacerda, the Governor of the Rios de Sena (Zambezi), made an expedition into Lunda territory, in an attempt to establish an overland communication between the Portuguese possessions on the Mozambique and Angola coasts, and to develop trade relations directly with Kazembe, eliminating Bisa and Yao(5) intermediaries. Lacerda died before he could be received by Lukwesa. His diary, continued by Pinto, the expedition's chaplain, constitutes the earliest substantial documentation on the life at the royal court. Lukwesa's son and successor, Keleka (reigned 1805-50), was visited in 1806 by two "pombeiros", native-born travelling traders in Portuguese employ, and in 1830 by a Portuguese trade mission led by Major Monteiro. Keleka was an unpopular ruler and lost to the Bemba the eastern marches gained by his father from the Bisa.(6) An Arab merchant, Ibn ben Saleh, arrived in 1854 and by the time of Livingstone's visit Arab and Swahili slave-traders were already firmly established and influential. They supplied cotton cloth and other merchandise in exchange for slaves and ivory, which commanded high prices on the Zanzibar coast. The Yeke raids precipitated a new wave of immigration. Imperilled headmen fleeing from their villages came to Kazembe for protection and were allowed to settle with their followers. The kingdom was now suffering reverses for the first time after decades of domination and undisputed supremacy over the small and loosely organised outlying chiefdoms.(7) For a time Kanyembo Nkemena, the reigning Kazembe, driven out of the country by the Yeke chief Msidi, had to seek refuge with Mwamba, a Bemba chief.

The Kazembe, although sovereign in fact, had in name remained a vassal of Muata Yamvo to whom tribute was still being sent in the 1870s.(8) With the defeat of the Arab chief Mlozi by Sir Harry Johnston in 1894(9) the slave trade was effectively suppressed. By this time the country had passed under the administration of the British South Africa Company which, in 1892, set up an administrative post on the Kalungwishi, which then marked the northern boundary of the kingdom.(10) The Kazembe offered resistance and was overcome. The first mission station was established in 1899 by Plymouth Brethren; the London Missionary Society opened a station at Mbereshi in 1900.

(1) Valdez, op.cit., p.258.
(2) ibid., pp.258-60.
(3) Gamitto, 1937, I, p.332; Valdez, op.cit., p.228.
(4) Bowdich, 1824, p.86; Johnston, 1897, p.59.
(5) Coxhead, op.cit., p.4.
(6) Gamitto, 1937, II, p.15.
(7) Burton 1873, p.43; Valdez 1861, I, p.237.
(8) Pogge, 1880.
(9) Coxhead, loc.cit.
(10) Livingstone, 1874, I, p.243.

175 Some Tabwa came with the British South African Company, and a group of Mambwe followed the missionaries to Mbereshi. From 1910 until 1922, when the villages returned to their old sites, the river belt had to be evacuated owing to the menace of sleeping sickness. The development of mining in the Katanga and the Copperbelt created a demand for labour and opened a market for the Luapula fish. The expansion of the fish trade organised by Greek refugees in the late 1920s stimulated a new influx of immigrants to the valley, many of them from across the Belgian Congo border. The present Kazembe, Chinyanta Nankula, is the fourteenth holder of the office.

LANGUAGE

197 The various dialects of Bemba (*Shila, Tabwa, Lunga, Aushi, Cinalunda*) spoken in the valley are not necessarily related to the tribal origins of the people. Cinalunda is a Bemba dialect with a slight Kampukolo admixture. The use of *Cilunda*, the language of the western (Congo) Lunda, and of its modified form, *Kampukolo*,(1) has never spread beyond the court circles. Both died out during the nineteenth century and now only survive [202] in the traditional praise-formulae composed for each Kazembe on his accession, and as the drum-language.

PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

133 Rapid-free and easily navigable in its lower course, the Luapula flows towards Lake Mweru at an altitude of some 3,000 feet down a flat, trough-like valley in which "sandstones of the Katanga system, granites and other rocks are overlaid by deep soil accumulations".(2) The flat floor of the valley rises steeply to the Chishinga plateau and more gently to the Kundelungu range on the Congo side. The river, in places overgrown by mudd vegetation, carries masses of floating papyrus. Except for a ten-mile stretch at Lukwesa and a four-mile one at Chisenga, its eastern bank is bordered by a belt of permanent swamp widening towards Lake Mweru. Sandbanks and patches of hard land are more in evidence down the western side. The swampy, seasonally flooded margin, up to ten miles wide, is studded with pools and lagoons and intersected by transverse channels giving access to the river from the villages. Flood-plain grasslands are burned in the dry season. The adjecent strip of fertile, alluvial land, not subject to floods, contains practically the whole population of the Rhodesian side. Further east, towards the escarpment, stretches for some twenty miles a bush-covered, almost uninhabited no-man's-land (*mulundu*) well stocked with wild fauna. Slow-flowing streams make their way down the open grassy dambo valleys to the Luapula.

132 The climate is of the savannah type with a single rainy season from October-November to April-May. The annual rainfall, lower in the valley than on the sheltering plateau, ranges from 36 inches at Chiengi (which lies on the Lake Mweru basin but outside Kazembe's kingdom) to 46 inches at Johnston Falls.(3) The mean minimum temperature at Chiengi, (the only records available) is 66.4°F(4)

(1) Valdez, II, pp.229 and 243.
(2) Trapnell, 1943, p.1.
(3) ibid, p.2.
(4) ibid, p.3.